

***Uncontained* and the Constraints of Historicism as Method:**

A reply to Mario Pissarra

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Mario Pissarra's rigorous and considered critical review of *Uncontained: Opening the Community Arts Project archive* (2012) marks a significant contribution to starting a discussion that the book and exhibition aimed to provoke. That an interlocutor of his authority has undertaken such an attentive and thoughtful critique does the publication a great service and opens up pathways for further conversation and work on the Community Arts Project (CAP) art collection at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). I would like to reciprocate in a similar vein and take up *Third Text Africa's* invitation to respond to Pissarra's review by thinking about the merits and limits of his critique.

As 'Uncontained? The constraints of ahistoricism in the 'opening' of the Community Arts Project Archive at the Centre for Humanities Research' points out, the book accompanied an exhibition curated by Emile Maurice at the City of Cape Town's Art.b Gallery in Bellville from 08 May-18 June 2012 and at Iziko South African National Gallery (SANG) from August 2012-May 2013. As co-editors of the book and in our respective roles as arts educator and exhibition curator and co-ordinator of the writing project culminating in the book, Maurice and I collaborated on a collection of creative and critical works that was launched as part of the CHR's larger CAP project.¹ The core of Pissarra's critique revolves around a charge that this joint publication is 'ahistorical.' The notion of historicism appears to be tied to a rather more empiricist view that filling the gaps of history involves an engagement with 'sources' which would include fleshing out an organisational history of CAP and biographies of the artists. He elaborates a range of ways in which the contributing authors should have been introduced to the artworks, how they should have engaged with their selections of

¹ It is instructive to note in this regard that a number of public education programmes were conducted for the duration of both shows. These included a series of lino cutting workshops, facilitated by artist, Garth Erasmus and sponsored by the City of Cape Town during the exhibition's showing at Art.b Gallery. The public education programme during the Iziko SANG showing of the exhibition included workshops facilitated by Iziko SANG arts educators with visiting public and private high schools doing the Grade 12 Arts and Culture curriculum for which a worksheet was designed. In addition, Iziko SANG conducted community outreach workshops in print-making facilitated and taught by artists associated with CAP, Sophie Peters and Ricky Dyaloyi. The print-making workshops culminated, in turn, with a thematically arranged exhibition of the student artworks entitled, 'Voices of the Youth' shown at the Iziko SANG Annexe in March 2013. The exhibition and book continue to draw interest from a wider South African and international audience to which a number of reviews attest. See, for example, Mathew Reitz, 'The Shape of A Nation,' *Times Higher Education*, 03 January 2013, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/422268.article>, Accessed 01 November 2013. Also, Lucinda Jolly, "'Uncontained' Resistance,' *Cape Times* 21 February 2013, http://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/uncontained-resistance-1.1474737#.UjW0fX9q_, Accessed 01 November 2013.

pieces from artists associated with the Community Arts Project and how this would have made the book more ‘historicist,’ and, of course, a rather different project.

In this initial response to ‘Uncontained?’ I focus on two aspects of the author’s critique to begin what hopefully may become a longer conversation. Firstly, I address the constitution of the collection and attendant silences and exclusions to which Pissarra’s review brings significant attention. I believe that a conversation about the arrival of the CAP archive at UWC proves productive in attending to questions of access and engagement with the art. Indeed, the historical conditions of the new institutional location of the works *as a collection* shape this dialogue. Secondly, I open the book’s method to further scrutiny. I am grateful to have the opportunity to do so as Pissarra’s critique reveals the extent to which the challenges, discussions and processes that informed the publication’s method and final form are not available in the book as it appears. Examining the location of the CAP art collection at its current institutional home and of the method of *Uncontained* are offered together with the intention of addressing, in part, Pissarra’s critique of the book’s lack of ‘historicism’ and its ‘scant self-reflexivity about the limits of the collection in representing CAP.’² I hope that in doing this I will offer a sense of what it has meant for us as editors and members of the CAP project team at the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) to take history and historicism seriously so as to initiate the ‘Uncontained’ project as an enquiry on aesthetics from the institutional location of the University of the Western Cape.

Separate educational institutions created under apartheid meant that many South African universities such as the University of the Western Cape, as well as other institutions inaugurated as Black universities, were denied the opportunity of forming curricula in the creative and aesthetic disciplines or of building institutional infrastructure to sustain such work. The creative disciplines at other institutions, such as Fort Hare University were placed under the constraints and taxonomical orders of ‘Bantu arts.’ With the donation in 2009 of the historic body of artworks from the Community Arts Project collection the material constraints of this institutional history and infrastructural inheritance presented a substantial challenge to constituting the art pieces as a collection and to forging new spaces for the encounter between artistic work and intellectual work.

What would it mean to generate new areas of humanities scholarship and postgraduate research at an institution where creative disciplines and institutional cultures and practices of arts collecting had been historically disallowed? In order to attend carefully to this question, we chose to approach the constraints of history as the grounds from which to proceed. That is, we proceeded in the spirit of risk-taking, engaged curiosity, immense appreciation for the art that its makers have conferred in posterity and a commitment to the intellectual task at hand unconfined by a narrative of history that might scoff at the temerity of such an endeavour. We also proceeded in the spirit of serious engagement with the scholarly gravitas and intellectual creativity of colleagues and postgraduate students in their encounters with the artworks from the CAP collection. To a large degree, this asked for a mode of working which refused to engage the lack of resources, infrastructure and disciplinary ‘expertise’ of more established creative arts departments and collecting institutions as a sign of ‘underdevelopment.’ Indeed, this is an historical inheritance that continues to bedevil such efforts. Recently, for example, the CHR submitted a proposal for one of the two National

² Mario Pissarra, ‘Uncontained? The constraints of ahistoricism in the “opening” of the Community Arts Project archive at the Centre for Humanities Research,’ *Third Text Africa*, 3:1, 2013, p 73, <http://www.asai.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Uncontained-.pdf>, Accessed 01 November 2013.

Research Foundation's Centres of Excellence in the Humanities to be established nationally. The CHR's proposal was rejected, not on the grounds of its overall intellectual project but owing to the university's institutional lack of infrastructure, such as an art gallery. Here is a sharp reminder that history cannot be reduced to method and discipline. Rather than begin from the grounds of a complaint about the constraints wrought by the systemic inheritance of institutional 'weakness' in the creative arts at UWC, we sought to open pathways for an enquiry to emerge through an encounter between the arts, aesthetic work and intellectual engagement from within an institution shaped on those grounds.

These historical conditions and broad conceptual questions informed the nature of the 'Uncontained' enquiry. But let me turn to those aspects of collection and selection that also constitute the challenges to access and exclusions to which Pissarra directly refers.³ With resources made available by the university, for the most part, the task of systematically accessioning and digitising the collection was begun. It has not yet been completed and is still underway. It is crucial to mention here that the collection arrived at UWC through the efforts and foresight of CAP/Arts and Media Access Centre (AMAC) trustee, Lucy Alexander. In the face of financial crisis and the collection's impending dispersal by liquidators, Alexander had the foresight and keen understanding of the importance of the artworks *as a collection* to want it secured and lodged at UWC as a collection. Some four thousand paintings, prints, posters, sculptures, photographs, drawings and studies had not been accessible until then. Under the leadership of Maurice, assisted by Mark van Niekerk and three UWC postgraduate students, Dr Okechukwu Nwafor, Agbo George Emeka and Busiswa Mofu, one thousand artworks were digitised and two CD's produced by the middle of 2011. Two years after the arrival of the collection and with just over a quarter of the works accessioned and digitised, the CHR undertook to open a selection of the pieces for an aesthetic enquiry and public viewing through an exhibition. As curator, Maurice chose 150 prints of which eighty were framed due to budget limitations for the exhibition. Prints from the initial selection were made available for contributors to the writing project that culminated in the 'Uncontained' exhibition and the publication of the *Uncontained* book. The book's publication was funded entirely by a grant from the university.

As Pissarra affirms, in as much as CAP and the artists associated with it gave artistic expression to the anti-apartheid resistance regionally and internationally, the artworks that Maurice selected for the exhibition and book represent a significant part of the important aesthetic vernacular that grew out of the political struggle against apartheid. Rather than confining the artworks to a reading of anti-apartheid aesthetics, Maurice's initial selection was made on the basis of his evaluation of the aesthetic power of the artworks. This was not to limit interpretations of that vernacular or represent a 'broad apartheid metanarrative.'⁴ The selection was made on the basis of the works that had already been accessioned which were prints and mainly linocuts.⁵ After making his initial selection of prints whose aesthetic potency held particular impact for him as curator, Maurice turned to the conceptual organisation of the works for exhibition. His curatorial decision was to organise the pieces thematically. This decision was viewed as a way to extend apprehension of the aesthetic

³ Ibid. pp 73-74

⁴ Ibid. p 60

⁵ For a discussion of the curatorial process see, Emile Maurice, 'Curating "Uncontained: Opening the Community Arts Project archive,"' 20 February 2013, http://www.archivalplatform.org/blog/entry/curating_uncontained_opening_the_community_arts_project_archive/, Accessed 01 November 2013.

power and visual grammar of the works beyond the confines of ‘anti-apartheid’ or ‘struggle’ art. This was a decision that we extended to the book and to the writing brief to invited authors.

I came on board the project team in early August 2011 when I joined the CHR as an academic member of staff. At that stage the idea of a writing project and book was being discussed. I agreed that the thematic grouping of artworks was a persuasive mode of proceeding in order to ‘open’ the collection, interpretations of and interpretative approaches to the works in a book. And I concurred that ideas of history, historicism and historiography in the mode of sequence, periodisation, chronology, causality and context be complicated. As my colleagues, I also take the idea of history seriously, and by this, I do not mean the scholarly discipline of history alone. We were of a similar view that the artworks provoked thinking about aesthetics, politics, society and the ‘the human’ in the contemporary postapartheid in profound and poignant ways. And we wanted to invite authors to engage in as least prescribed ways as possible with the immense aesthetic power of the prints as these evoke, provoke, resonate, respond and awaken a range of insights about the current moment, its promises and its predicaments.

Maurice had by then identified an array of broad themes in the approximately 150 prints selected for the exhibition ranging from colonialism, forced removals, rural life, landscape, celebration, intimate relationships, Blackness, education, the role of the artist, death, abstraction, animal rights, religion, landscapes, books/reading, labour, public figures and anti-apartheid struggle, to name a few. Extending the fairly loose thematisation of the artworks to group the works and to invite authors to write for the book was a way to open the CAP prints to a much wider interpretative field and a more complicated, messy notion of history in the book. As an organising principle of the writing project, the thematic rubrics placed works in juxtaposition no matter that they had been created by different artists at different times. By bringing together works that ordinarily would not be placed together, surprising points of connection, dissonance, disjuncture and intersection emerged. This would not be the case had the images been arranged chronologically, or organised by artist, historical period, or through the lens of a social history of CAP. In positioning the works in these loosely thematised groups, Maurice opened the works to different ways of seeing and apprehending. And it was this idea of apprehending and interpreting in other ways that would not be constrained by disciplinary taxonomies and methods, or by expert discourses and ‘insider’ knowledge.

This strategy was extremely generative. It enabled us to engage the heterogenous and often utterly discordant meanings and associations that CAP/Mediaworks and AMAC seem to throw up, as Pissarra elaborates,⁶ as a productive *method* from which to proceed. To whomever we spoke about CAP that had been involved with that community arts space there seemed to be her or his own CAP, her or his own memories of CAP, her or his own narratives about what CAP was and what CAP was not, what CAP did, and what it did not do. That it was a singularly important space is the one common thread that ran through the accounts that we read and those that we heard. Still, there was no one narrative or orientation that we could hold onto, or that we wanted to. There was no one understanding that stayed long enough before slipping through our fingers and being displaced by another CAP, someone else’s CAP. Indeed, there are many anecdotes, stories and claims on CAP. Together they simmer

⁶ Mario Pissarra, ‘Uncontained? The constraints of ahistoricism in the “opening” of the Community Arts Project archive at the Centre for Humanities Research,’ *Third Text Africa*, 3:1, 2013, pp 60-61, <http://www.asai.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Uncontained-.pdf>, Accessed 01 November 2013.

with a creative, political and performative plurality, with a tension that comes from many understandings that rub against each other and which appear deeply fraught, contested and difficult to pin down. This brings me to Pissarra's critique of the loose and open-ended term, 'the CAP artist' or artist associated with CAP, as it appears throughout the book,⁷ which, for him, has led to a homogenisation and an ahistorical flattening of the meaning. Beyond the artists, students, managers, teachers, activists and cultural workers associated with CAP in its different phases and iterations, so too are there many understandings of who and what 'the CAP artist' is and was. Just as the meanings of what CAP signified travelled out of CAP and into public discourse and popular imagination, so too did the idea of artists who have been associated with CAP, in whichever capacity whether as teachers, students, artists, activists or managers. Different understandings of 'the CAP artist' entered different discursive spaces and a variety of intellectual milieu and this is borne out precisely by the different ways that the term is used by the contributing authors according to their own understandings of its meanings. While this does not provide a deconstruction or historical differentiation of the term, it does offer a rich sense of the many meanings that CAP and artists associated with CAP hold in a much wider, 'outsider' imagination as these terms travelled outside and away from CAP.

So what did it mean for us to convene a project on CAP artworks by intellectuals, writers and scholars whose concerns are outside the field of art history and who are generally not organisational 'insiders'? For one thing, the interconnections of aesthetics, politics and critical discourses on visual and textual practice had to be thought anew in relation to the historicity of institutional location from which the enquiry emerges and at which the CAP art collection is emplaced. For another, the field of writing about visual concerns was expanded and opened considerably. These considerations shaped our approach to the writing brief inviting authors to contribute which we sent to around forty-two scholars, writers and cultural workers whose research, creative and intellectual specialisations were concerned with the themes given by the curator. Invited authors were sent digital versions of the images gathered under the particular thematic rubrics. We also invited authors to view the originals at the Robben Island Museum (RIM)/Mayibuye archive at UWC where they are stored. Some writers took up this offer; others did not. If there was not a date or signature on a work when it was accessioned, it was signalled as unsigned and undated. Included on the book's imprints page is a note that states as much, and that we would appreciate leads to assist with further research in this regard. Indeed, Pissarra, amongst others, have responded by dating and attributing some of the works of which the accessioning team was not able to ascertain the date or attribute the artist.

Often, there was a broader selection of images under the thematic rubric that were sent to writers. However, only the images that were addressed directly in the authors' texts were the ones reproduced, finally, in the book. Those works not directly addressed were not included in the book, despite the larger curator's selection of images having been circulated in the initial invitation to write. So here was another round of exclusion and selection of works, determined by what the authors chose to write about.

The contributors were asked to explore, in any way they chose, the meanings and contemporary resonances of the artworks through the array of possible subjects that the works appear to address. Authors were briefed, in particular, to consider the interpretative

⁷ Ibid. pp 64-70.

pathways suggested by the images from their own perspectives, interests and fields of specialisation. There was no prescription or direction imposed. We invited contributors to rename the themed headings should these be too constraining, narrow or not relevant to the concerns that they saw as being animated in a given group of artworks. We also encouraged an exploration in text that responded to the pieces in ways that were most compelling for each individual author. We felt that this approach would encourage an interpretative engagement that could embrace intellectual rigour, curiosity and creativity. It could offer insight into untried interpretative pathways which were not limited by disciplinary discourse or method in the trajectories that authors wished to pursue. As the writing proceeded, however, there were a number of conversations with individual contributors about different images that they were considering. Sometimes, authors asked for more information about an artwork and we assisted when we were able.

For us, this would not be a *conventionally* historicist engagement, which we felt might restrict interpretation of the works to a social history of CAP and which would require a less oblique and creative grappling with overdetermined narrative templates of time and desire of/for history and politics. Finally, thirty-one authors contributed thirty-seven texts responding to artworks in the exhibition, as well as works not on show, to form what became the book with contributing authors, as Pissarra notes,⁸ being mainly academic scholars from UWC from departments as diverse as English, History, Women and Gender Studies, the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies and the CHR. But there are also academic scholars from UCT and UNISA, as well as non-affiliated intellectuals, creative writers and contributors from cultural organisations.

The project that Pissarra wants to see done with the book – a rather more empiricist one in which ‘sources,’ documentary and archival research, artist biographies and organisational history – is both a necessary and important one. It must be undertaken. Pissarra very usefully charts ways in his review that suggest an approach to such an endeavour. Indeed, discussions are afoot currently with a view to explore this possibility. But that is a very different project to the one we undertook as a ‘first iteration’ of opening and thinking with works from the CAP art collection at UWC. It is the historicity of the collection’s arrival at UWC and the ‘Uncontained’ project’s institutional location that we engaged in order to reinvigorate the debate on creative arts education. This brings me to my final point: With the ‘Uncontained’ project, the CHR invited an examination of how the idea of aesthetics was never seamed up by the institutionalised racialisation of the creative arts under settler colonial rule and apartheid. Indeed, it remains up for grabs. The stakes of this are high, and I hope my response, as a first one, has shown why, in this regard, it is crucial to think about the CAP art collection *at UWC*.

In considering how the artworks in the CAP art collection speak to the question of aesthetics for imagining different forms of political and affective life some twenty years after the end of formal apartheid, we envisaged a book that could invite a rethinking of the social, cultural and political scripts inherited from apartheid’s administrative reason. So the book was intended as a provocation to reflect on how the CAP artworks may help us to think about society, politics, the aesthetic imagination, the question of the subject and the horizons of human life in the postapartheid. With this, the ‘Uncontained’ project extended into the domain of an aesthetic enquiry the CHR’s intellectual commitments to thinking the

⁸ Ibid. p 85.

postapartheid, institutional and disciplinary reason in its wake, knowledge politics and debates in the humanities.⁹ The book sought to open new possibilities for humanities research in aesthetics and politics. At the same time, it sought to signal that a debate on new paradigms of art education and aesthetic inquiry at secondary and tertiary educational institutions, particularly at former Black universities, is long overdue. In this regard, Pissarra's critical review and the commitment of *Third Text Africa* to convening this discussion is a most welcome intervention.

⁹ See Premesh Lalu, 'Still Searching for the Human,' *Social Dynamics*, 38:1, pp 3-7 and Suren Pillay, 'Decolonising the humanities,' *Mail & Guardian*, 05 April 2013. <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-04-05-decolonising-the-humanities>, Accessed 01 November 2013.